Ghadi, *Bébé*, *Rabih,* and *By Chance*:
Disability as a Narrative Device in Lebanese Cinema (2010–2019)

Roy Jreijiry
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4872-8773
Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Lebanese University (Beirut)

Carla Dreij
University of Côte d'Azur (Nice) and the Lebanese University (Beirut)
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3110-6811

Abstract

Disability is not a subject that is often covered in contemporary Lebanese cinema, despite a few initiatives taking place in the past decade. This article analyses the representations of characters with disabilities in four Lebanese films: *Ghadi* (2013), *Bébé* (2013), *Rabih* or *Tramontane* (2016), and *By Chance* or *Bel Sodfé* (2019). The study reveals that these films oscillate between critiquing societal norms and state policies, covering the disability from a medical standpoint, and normalizing disability. Additionally, the films underscore the significant role played by families in caring for disabled individuals in Lebanon. The study also highlights how the portrayal of disability was exaggerated when played by able-bodied actors but was more understated and sometimes excessively normalized when the actors had real-life disabilities. Finally, the article argues that taking intersectional identity into account can lead to more nuanced and diverse conclusions about the representation of disability in Lebanese cinema.

Keywords: Lebanese movies, disability & cinema, film analysis, intersectional identity

Introduction

Lebanon has been marked by multiple armed conflicts for nearly half a century and people with disabilities constitute a significant, yet marginalized, group, facing numerous challenges. These challenges stem from the lack of strong, enforceable laws, weak infrastructure, inadequate services, as well as social stigma and exclusion. Given these circumstances, "the responsibility for caring for persons with disabilities falls primarily on their families" (CESCR 4). People with

disabilities are estimated to represent at least 15% of the country's population, which amounts to more than 900,000 individuals, forming "one of the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in any crisis-affected community" (WRC & UNICEF 5).

Adopted in 2000, Law 220 has a "narrow definition" of disability based on an "outdated medical model" (Combaz 5). Adopted after years of awareness raising by groups attempting to support various disabled individuals, particularly those impacted by the fifteen-year civil war (1975–1990), this law is not enforced by the State. For example, the government does not provide any implementation mechanisms for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market, which "implies a discriminatory trend in the labour market against individuals with disabilities, who participate in the workforce at significantly lower rates than those without disabilities," as stated by Boutros and Fakih (13). Additionally, "80 percent of persons with disabilities are not or have never been employed" (CESCR 4), contrary to the quota mentioned in the law.

Detrimental political and economic conditions exacerbate structural and social inequalities linked to class, nationality, refugee status, age, gender, as well as those linked to the type or severity of an individual's disability. For instance, women with disabilities almost invariably face discrimination due to the intersection of disability and gender, as noted by Samantha Wehbi and Yahya El-Lahib. Similarly, Wehbi and Sylvana Lakkis stated that "within Lebanese society, ableist conceptions of women with disabilities posit that these women are forever dependent on their families" (58). Another study conducted in 2014 by Muriel Tyan et al. demonstrated how the religious variable influences the perception of disability (autism in the work undertaken by Tyan et al.). The authors assert that disability "has a more positive connotation and experience for Muslim families and more negative perceptions for Christian families." The former "emphasize the place and status of the person with a disability," while the latter have "a perception of shame, sin, or punishment" (80)[1].

Despite, indeed because of, the challenging environment, various initiatives, some originating from NGOs, aimed at raising awareness about the issue of disability and promoting the employment of people with disabilities have emerged in recent years. However, disability in Lebanon "remains under-researched" (Combaz 2), especially when it comes to the representation

of people with disabilities in the media. The above explains why the authors became interested in analysing the presence of people with disabilities within Lebanese cinema during the 2010s. Our research question is as follows: When individuals with disabilities are given the main role, how are they portrayed? What is their role within the plot? What do we know about their personal experiences?

On Disability and Disability Studies

There is no universally accepted definition of disability that fully explores what the term means, and what it could encompass. While disability is often defined in terms of physical or mental limitations, assessed in relation to a biomedical norm, contemporary definitions emphasize its social dimension, as exemplified by the definition in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) of the United Nations: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (Article 1, 4). Thus, disability is defined as an "operation of power," as stated by Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (140), which produces social categories of difference. It is a social construct resulting from the failure of social and institutional structures to respond to individuals' impairments and a cultural construct arising from the dominant perception of disability and the identities of people with disabilities, rather than from individual impairments. This "excludes [people with disabilities] from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS 14) and leads to a form of "oppression" (Abberley).

The field of Disability Studies emerged in the context of individuals and organizations advocating for the rights of people with disabilities in the 1960s and 1970s, challenging established political and social norms, often dating back to antiquity, where people with disabilities were marginalized and stigmatized, and whose oppression "has been exacerbated by industrialization and its accompanying ideologies" (Barnes 76). In parallel, academic studies on disability underwent developments with the adoption of the social model, especially in the UK, and with the involvement of groups of disabled activists, with the field rising to prominence in the late 1980s.

Later, critical work on disability studies would question certain concepts embraced by the social model: "It aims to situate understandings of disability not just in the body or the environment, but in how specific bodies are understood in context, how they move or do not move, how they interface with social structures, the self, and power" (McRae 221). For example, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell pointed out that "disability studies has strategically neglected the question of the experience of disabled embodiment in order to disassociate disability from its mooring in medical cultures and institutions" (368). Goodley emphasized that "the intersectional character of disability is one of a number of reasons why we might conceptualize the contemporary state of the field as *critical* disability studies" (632). Like other disciplines originating from social movements, such as Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Civil Rights Studies, and Intersectionality Studies, Disability Studies has evolved, becoming more nuanced in approach. This evolution has sparked debates and conflicts within both activist and intellectual spheres.

Theoretical Frameworks and the Methodological Process

Our study is framed within the theory of media representation as formulated by Stuart Hall, who wrote: "We give things meaning by how we represent them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them" (3). In the same vein, Kath Woodward stated that "representation is a key component in the construction of identities, in their presentation and reception and in the ways in which identity becomes meaningful. It is through language, symbolic systems, rituals and practices that we make sense of who we are, understand who others are and imagine the boundaries that contain the self and mark it off from others" (100).

The period covered by this work spans the previous decade (2010–2019), which, in Lebanon, was characterized by an emerging awareness of issues related to mental health, the needs of marginalized groups such as women, and by some initiatives aimed at people with disabilities (such as the opening of a room for autistic children at Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport in April 2018). It is also the period preceding the economic crisis that hit the country, the consequences of which were significant for marginalized communities.

From 2010 to 2019, 105 feature films were produced or co-produced in Lebanon. Of these films, four prominently featured disability as a central theme: *Ghadi* (2013), *Bébé* (2013), *Rabih* or *Tramontane* (2016), and *By Chance* or *Bel Sodfé* (2019)[2]. All four films are in Lebanese Arabic dialect. In our work, we adopted the approach of Narrative Prosthesis theory: the theory highlights how disability is used in cinematic narratives to support, enhance, or symbolize other aspects of the story rather than people with disabilities being portrayed as fully developed characters with their own stories and experiences, in turn, the theory questions how this can influence how disabled characters are represented and perceived in society. The theory "refers to both the prevalence of disability representation and the myriad meanings ascribed to it" (Mitchell and Snyder 4). In a critical perspective on cinema, we aim to identify stereotypes and narrative conventions while exploring the different ways in which disability is represented. To do this, we viewed each film, calculated the screen time of the character with disability, identified the discourse that defines or describes him or her, and analysed the character's portrayal, role, dialogues, and staging.

Disability on Screen: A Literature Review

It is widely acknowledged that the media plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of social realities, especially when it comes to social issues and the perception of marginalized groups such as people with disabilities. However, the media does not always act as a mere social mirror. In the realm of cinema, various factors can influence how films reflect their social environment, such as the agendas of funding agencies, ideological biases, and commercial preferences, among others. Regardless of whether the resulting cinematic representations stem from an intention to reflect societal norms or are influenced by the perspectives of mediators or producers, they have the potential to solidify, redirect, and reinvent the norms and values of a society at a given time. Thus, cinema contributes to shaping the collective consciousness around topics like disability and has the potential to expand the horizons of what is possible within society.

Historically, "the scholarship on cinema and disability has followed the assumption that negative images of people with disabilities on the screen create negative situations for people

living with disabilities in society" (Smit and Enns x). In this context, Paul K. Longmore's article, "Screening stereotypes: image of disabled people," published in 1985, is a landmark study of media representations of disabled individuals, highlighting prevalent biases and stereotypes. For a long time, "disability has been harnessed for exploitation by narratives—filmic, literary or otherwise—that reaffirm the denigrating discourse of disability as lack from the perspective of a medical model or as a product of an ableist imaginary" (Fraser 6). In a study published in 1998, Stephen P. Safran demonstrated that, with regard to the portrayal of disability in film since 1898, "psychiatric disorders were found to be the most frequently depicted, with many stereotypic depictions of a wide range of disabilities identified" (467), and that these depictions were used "to create metaphors not only of terror, pity, and ridicule, but also of heroism, empathy, and community integration" (477). Sarah Patricia Hill noted that "the marginalisation of disabled people therefore takes place in a context of extreme visibility, in which fictional characters with impairments bear a heavy load of symbolic and metaphoric meanings" (171).

From the perspective of the people with disabilities, studies have shown that they "believed that mass media, in general, frame people with disabilities as supercrips, disadvantaged, or ill victims" (Zhang and Haller, "Consuming Image" 329). In 2000, Jack A. Nelson identified six common categories for movie and television portrayals of those with disabilities: the victim, the hero, the threat, the one unable to adjust, the one that had to be cared for (the burden) and the one who should not have survived (183). Martin F. Norden stated that movies have not only contributed to perpetuating mainstream society's perception of people with disabilities, but have also "tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other" (1).

Despite all these challenges, many films and filmmakers are attempting to portray people with disabilities in a more authentic and positive manner. In her analysis of three contemporary mainstream cinema comedies, Karin Ljuslinder showed that "empowering images and stereotypes of disability exist simultaneously as competing discourses in media representations" (267). Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns have pointed out that "depictions and portrayals of persons who live with disability in motion pictures have changed over time, sometimes reflecting, at other times influencing, societal attitudes and beliefs" (ix). Analysing 400 episodes of children's television programs in the US, Bradley J. Bond concluded that "a majority of

characters with a physical disability were depicted as morally good, attractive, and satisfied with life," and able-bodied characters treated characters with a physical disability "the same way they treated other able-bodied characters" (408). Katie Ellis notes that by the 2000s, Australian cinema "began to include disability in terms of diversity and narratives examined both the physical difference of having a disability and the social stigma that came along with it" (69). Around the world, the disability civil rights movement, awareness campaigns, and the increased visibility of experiences facilitated by new media are contributing to changing traditional representations of disability in mainstream media.

In Lebanon, few researchers and studies have focused on the representation of people with disabilities in the media. In their article on the portrayal of people with disabilities in Arabic drama, Suhail M. Al-Zoubi and Samer M. Al-Zoubi reviewed 17 studies from around the Arab world that existed prior to 2022. Their synthesis concludes that Arab television series contribute to the formation of negative attitudes and stereotypes toward people with disabilities among Arab viewers. According to the research, plots do not adequately address disability-related issues, either by minimizing or by infantilizing the experiences of disabled characters within the story. A few narratives have portrayed disability in a positive light: "70.59% of the portrayals of PWDs [people with disabilities] in Arabic drama were presented as negative behavioural stereotypes, while 17.65% were positive and negative stereotypes, and 11.76 were positive stereotypes, respectively" (5). Among the 17 studies, only one focuses on a Lebanese media production. The study in question is Emily Jane O'Dell's analysis (2023) of the Lebanese series *The Tale of Amal* (alongside three other films and series from Egypt and Syria), which aired in 2001. This series addressed physical and visual disabilities, highlighting the poverty and often extremely precarious health conditions of people with disabilities in Lebanon.

In his work, Paul Darke stated that images of people with disabilities "are as socially constructed, illusionary and functional as any other images (be they of the oppressed or not)" (181). In this paper, we propose to deconstruct these images and reveal the stereotypes and values they perpetuate.

Preliminary Remarks on the Films

As previously mentioned, four films produced or co-produced in Lebanon between 2010 and 2019 address four different disabilities[3]. Down Syndrome, intellectual development disorder, blindness, and autism spectrum disorder. Three of the four films are named after the disabled character: *Ghadi*, *Bébé*, and *Rabih*. In the fourth film (*By Chance*), the disabled character, Taghreed, is not the main focus of the plot. Three of the four disabilities are congenital, while the fourth is caused by external factor: Bébé "developed a high fever when she was eight years old, unfortunately, she was given a defective medication that affected her brain and halted her intellectual growth" (01:27:13).

In their research on the TV show *Speechless*, Lingling Zhang and Beth Haller emphasized the positive impact that can be achieved when a character with a disability is portrayed by an actor with a disability (these are termed "Parasocial contact effects"). In our four films, two of the four disabled characters (the male figures) are portrayed by individuals with real disabilities (Ghadi, played by Emmanuel Khairallah, and Rabih, played by Barakat Jabbour), while the other two (the female figures) are portrayed by professional able-bodied actresses (Maguy Bou Ghosn for Bébé/Badiha and Pamela El Kik for Taghreed). We can also observe that, when the actors had real disabilities, their disabilities were clearly visible (Down Syndrome, blindness), whereas in the other two cases, those of the female characters, the disabilities are invisible (autism, intellectual development disorder).

On another note, we calculated the screen time for each character with a disability in the four movies relative to the running time, which represents the actual time during which the film is displayed on the screen, excluding all credits, i.e., the time taken by the film's scenes. The results show a significant disparity: Rabih and Bébé had a substantial amount of screen time in their respective movies, accounting for 73.64% and 51.89% of the film's running time, while Taghreed and Ghadi had only 14.27% and 11.27%, respectively (Table 2). This difference can be attributed to their roles in the plot as well as the utilization of disability within the narrative structure. Indeed, Ghadi serves as for the main focus of the plot where the disabled character constitutes the primary object of the film, rather than the subject, while Taghreed is very much secondary to the main storyline.

Title	Release Date	Director	Screenwriter	Duration	Genre
Ghadi	2013	Amin Dora	Georges Khabbaz	101 min	Drama / Comedy
Bébé	2013	Elie F. Habib	Claude Saliba	112 min	Romance / Comedy
Rabih / Tramontane	2016	Vatche Boulgourjian	Vatche Boulgourjian	101 min	Drama
By Chance / Bel Sodfé	2019	Bassem Christo	Claudia Marchalian	103 min	Drama / Romance

Name of the Character	Actor/Actress with Disability	Age	Condition	Impairment	Actual Running Time	Screen Time of the Character with Disability	% of Running Time
Ghadi (Emmanuel Khairallah)	Yes	0-4	Down syndrome	Physical, intellectual	96 min 14 sec	10 min 51 sec	11,27 %
Bébé/Badiha (Maguy Abou Ghosn)	No	33	Intellectual development disorder	Intellectual (cognitive age 8)	109 min 37 sec	56 min 53 sec	51,89 %
Rabih (Barakat Jabbour)	Yes	24	Blindness (visual impairment)	Sensory	94 min 15 sec	69 min 24 sec	73,63 %
Taghreed (Pamela El Kik)	No	Early thirties	Autism spectrum disorder	Behavioural	99 min	14 min 08 sec	14,27 %

Table 1. Film Information

Table 2. Profiles & Statistics of Characters with Disabilities

Down Syndrome in Ghadi

The story unfolds in a typical Lebanese village and is set in a Christian neighbourhood called Mshakkal, the name of which translates to "diverse." Léba Saba, the narrator, already has two daughters and is eagerly awaiting the arrival of a son. However, he and his wife, Lara, discover that the embryo is developing slowly and that there may be a possibility of a birth defect or disability. Seeking advice from his former music teacher, who has been his mentor in the past,

Fawzi, Léba questions him about his son's right to be born. Fawzi firmly encourages him to allow his son to fulfil his role in life, stating, "And who is free of deficiency? Everybody has one" (23:25). Fawzi refers to the child as "God's blessing" (23:10), as does the child's mother. Initially, the neighbours express sympathy for Léba, but their sentiment changes as Ghadi's noises begin to disturb their sleep and peace. Despite the neighbours' efforts to institutionalize the child, Léba resists and, together with less fortunate neighbours, devises a plan. He pretends that his child has started speaking to him and portrays him as an "angel" who can fulfil nearly all of the neighbourhood's requests. Over time, people begin to believe in this ruse, and Ghadi becomes accepted and cherished. His fame extends beyond the village's borders, attracting pilgrims and even media coverage. When the parish priest persuades Léba to reveal the truth to the residents, they refuse to accept the new reality. One of them responds emphatically: "Your son is undoubtedly an angel; look at what he has done for the neighbourhood. Who would believe you?" (01:35:26). Another chimes in, "The story has gone beyond you now, and is bigger than all of us!" (01:35:37).

a) Stereotypes about Mental Conditions

The film explores the recurring stereotypes in Lebanese society regarding individuals like Ghadi and, more generally, mental disabilities, within a critical context. Throughout the film, Ghadi is referred to by his neighbours as "retarded" ['atîli] and "idiot" [mahbûl]. The mindset that associates disability with punishment is depicted in the film, aligning with the findings of Tyan et al., and we hear expressions such as: "God save us!" (27:01 & 28:47); "Dear Virgin Mary, spare us!" (27:03); "God punished her [Ghadi's mother]" (31:48); "He is not just a retard; he is possessed by demons. Have you heard the noises he makes?" (28:10), from neighbours and acquaintances. While the protestations of pity or support from the villagers exhibit religious overtones, the father also uses religion to help his son become accepted in a conservative society, painting him as an angel sent by God. The belief that boys are more valuable than girls is also present, as is a parental perspective that doesn't consider the disabled individual, but rather their impact on the parents, specifically the father: "Poor Léba, his only son is a retard, couldn't have been one of the girls?!" (27:24).

b) Disability as a Family Drama

When Ghadi's sister comes home from school in tears, saying, "They said my brother is an idiot and ugly who makes loud devilish sounds" (40:15), her father replies, "They don't love him as we do because they don't know him as we do" (40:46). However, the viewer also does not learn much about Ghadi himself, who is referred to as "a small hero who won people's hearts with his laughter and sparkling eyes" (01:35:59). He has only 11 minutes of screen time. While in an early scene, he is shown being surrounded and loved by his parents and sisters, he quickly becomes the film's object rather than its subject, with recurring scenes of him yelling or singing from the window of his apartment. Although Léba's concerns were initially shown to be about the life his son will have, the plot largely focuses on society. Ghadi's personal or social experience is never addressed or shown, reinforcing stereotypes about individuals with Down Syndrome.

The inconsistency between Ghadi's minimal screen time and the film's title, which bears his name, demonstrates how the film uses disability for dramatic purposes without exploring his lived experience in depth. Disability in *Ghadi* is narrated as a family drama, especially in the eyes of the "other" able-bodied characters. His role in the plot is to improve the lives of able-bodied individuals, including those who were stigmatized, in order to promote their inclusion. As Jenny Morris stated in 1991, cultural representations of disability "say nothing about the lives of disabled people but everything about the attitudes of non-disabled people towards disability" (93). This is explicitly expressed in the plot, through the character of the mother addressing her sceptical ex-lover: "With all your education, you couldn't change anything in this neighbourhood, look at him, what he has accomplished in such a short time" (01:08:57), referring to her son. Despite these observations, the film does not lean towards exclusion. The plot integrates examples of various forms of discrimination into the main story, in a clear attempt to favour inclusion: Elie (or Lello) who is discriminated against for his gender identity, Abdallah for his skin colour (born to an African mother and a father from the village), and Karkar who faces discrimination due to his perceived simplicity or naivety.

Intellectual Development Disorder in Bébé

Badiha Badran, known as Bébé, is a 33-year-old mentally impaired woman with the intellectual development of an 8-year-old, and participates in children's theatre productions at the "Rose d'Amour" association. She lives with her greedy brother and her caring grandmother, who, upon her passing, leaves Bébé a sum of one million dollars in cash for her "bridal trousseau." Bébé sets out in search of a "large piggy bank" in which to hide her bills. At an ice cream parlour, she strikes up a friendship with a young boy named Ramy, accompanied by his father Ziad, who is a lawyer and a potential candidate in the legislative elections. Bébé and Ramy become friends, especially as Ramy is struggling to control his emotions at the time as his parents are divorced and are in a custody battle, and this has manifested as a stutter. This sequence of events leads to Bébé accompanying Ramy and Ziad throughout the day, all the way to the launch party for Ziad's election campaign.

After many twists and turns, Ramy finds solace in Bébé and overcomes his stutter, while his father falls in love with her, at this point, he has not discovered her intellectual disability, though he does so later. Meanwhile, Bébé's brother, Sajih, actively searches for her after learning that she has the money. He finds her after spotting her in a television report on the elections and decides to place her in a psychiatric institution where she is treated as if she were insane, based on falsified medical documents. However, Ziad does everything in his power to rescue Bébé and return her money. They all end up in court, which rules in favour of Bébé. But without guardianship, it is decided that she should be placed in a specialized centre. Ziad then becomes her guardian by marrying her.

a) Disability as a Metaphor

While Bébé is the main character of the film, her disability is used as a metaphor, which minimizes her personal experience as a person with a disability. Despite this, she has significant screen time (almost half of the running time). While both *Ghadi* and *Bébé* are labelled as comedies, *Bébé* alone contains comedic situations in which the disabled person is directly involved. Debbie Rodan et al. noted that "disability as a source of humour is an archetype of cultural representation" (82). The film's slogan, "Young Mind, Great Heart," is the sort of idea often associated with shallow moralizing, which becomes evident in Ziad's final narration: "I have learned that some people, even as they age, remain small in stature, while others, despite

their young age, can accomplish wonders with their innocence" (01:49:39). Thus, the portrayal of Bébé is crafted for entertainment rather than education, lacking a sense of real-world authenticity. Moreover, the film falls into a recent genre that aligns with TV movies, targeting the audience of TV series (Korkmaz 116), and with their entire cast coming from television backgrounds.

In various situations, Bébé is called an "idiot" by those close to her and is shown to behave in line with her mental age in several scenes. For example, she has fun on amusement rides, struggles to descend stairs in heels, shows intolerance to alcohol, and appears perplexed by concepts like "depression" and "political game." However, she is excessively infantilized in many scenes and situations: she has no understanding of death; she cannot grasp why people seem sad when offering her their condolences for her grandmother. Bébé also lacks an understanding of the value of money. At the ice cream parlour, she pays 1,900 dollars (a handful taken from her backpack) for an ice cream, while at a grocery store, Rami takes her backpack to prevent her from overpaying for a snack or hides it from curious onlookers. In a restaurant, she has a dispute with a little girl over claiming the nickname "Bébé" for herself. In court, she becomes uncontrollable, requiring repeated interventions from Ziad.

Furthermore, the film succumbs to a classic binary and simplistic portrayal: Bébé's childlike status gives her the ability to detect people's intentions. She is friendly and kind to all the individuals who are portrayed positively in the plot (repeating the phrase "but I love you very much" in various situations) and mocks the villains. However, for narrative reasons, she is never able to detect her brother's cruelty towards her, despite his mistreatment. The film thus uses Bébé's disability as a narrative to turn her into a victim who is saved by Ziad, the hero, clearly, this conforms to gender stereotypes.

b) The Male Gaze Perspective

On another level, the character is portrayed from the perspective of the male gaze, especially in a scene where close-ups focus on Bébé's sensual eating of ice cream in a suggestively erotic manner, combined with her partially opening of her pullover at chest level when she scratches an itch, this results in Ziad gazing upon her. Other scenes show many men casting desirous looks toward Bébé, captivated by her way of speaking, which is characterized by excessive

spontaneity. Bébé frequently violates the politically correct codes of conduct, impulsively addressing people with phrases she has heard in previous contexts, such as "Every rooster crows on his own dung heap" (58:49). She breaks the aura of arrogance around well-placed, evil, and corrupt individuals, making her more desirable in their eyes.

Her childlike behaviour fades in her romanticized exchanges with Ziad; she is seen drawing a heart pierced with the initials Z (for Ziad) and B (for Bébé). In another scene, she is under Ziad's influence and is about to kiss him (although in another scene, she pushes him away: "It is forbidden to kiss *bouche à bouche*" [01:06:29]). She is also charmed by him when, while playing with Ramy, she unexpectedly finds herself lying in bed face to face with Ziad. The climax is reached when Ziad marries Bébé.

The film raises ethical considerations about the capacity of a person with a cognitive impairment to make decisions related to marriage. Since consent for marriage requires that both parties have the capacity to understand the potential nature and consequences of marriage, *Bébé* shows how a mentally impaired person could be exploited or abused, by her brother, by Ziad's entourage, and ultimately by the act of marriage itself. However, in the case of the marriage, the plot suggests that this decision is made to ensure her protection and dignity. Still, the plot shows that the marriage is fully consummated, with a final scene depicting Bébé, "one year later," cuddling her baby.

Blindness in Rabih or Tramontane

Aged 24 and visually impaired, Rabih is a talented musician who plays and sings in a choir in the Lebanese village in which he lives. In order to travel with his group for a European tour, he applies for a passport at the General Security office, where he learns that his identity card is fake. Confronting his mother, she confesses that he is not her biological son and that his uncle, a man with an enigmatic past, brought him home from a distant village after a battle during the Lebanese Civil War. Determined to uncover the truth about his origins, he gradually follows leads that are presented to him. His travels cover much of Lebanon and he encounters a wide range of people, from the mayor of his village (or of the village where he might be from), to the hospital in which he was supposedly born, to a Shiite village in the south of Lebanon assumed to be his birthplace, to a friend of his uncle in the North, to the Armenian orphanage in Byblos, to

his uncle's former fiancée, May, to a psychiatric hospital where a friend of his uncle is interned, and to a family that he believes he was separated from during the Civil War. Each lead takes him on a series of journeys across the country where he meets people from different backgrounds, all of whom are unable to narrate their own stories or his. The penultimate scene shows him at the General Security office, picking up his passport, with his friend Tarek assisting him with the fingerprinting. The film concludes with a long scene in a theatre where Rabih, accompanied by the troupe, plays and then sings solo, with his mother and uncle present in the audience. It ends without Rabih discovering his identity, perhaps indicating that it was the metaphorical and literal journey that was important.

a) Disability Normalized

Rabih is not depicted as suffering from his impairment. From the beginning, the film sketches out his personal experience, his life, and the challenges he faces. This positive portrayal is also reflected in the screen time allocated to Rabih, accounting for 73.6% of the actual running time (Table 2). We see him engaged in daily activities, with frequent close-ups and extended scenes that provide deeper insights into his experience. He moves around his home (where he lives with his mother), uses the fridge, returns home in the evening, casually placing his jacket on the sofa without hesitation, and joins a family gathering in the courtyard where he sings and plays the darbuka (a traditional drum). We also see him in individual settings, sitting at a table, or lost in thought in the evening, revealing symbolic aspects of his complex inner world. At school, his character is vibrant: he sings, plays musical instruments (the drum and the violin), leads the group, and gives instructions. It's clear that he is well integrated and appreciated there. Therefore, his disability is situational, as it does not impact his life in every situation.

His blindness is shown to impose few restrictions on him: his friend and colleague Tarek picks him up from home to go to school. He is guided by the arm when he is in unfamiliar places, and, as a recurring theme, the people accompanying him whisper the word "daraj" (stairs) to him when he faces a flight of stairs, and he reacts promptly to this cue. We even see him alone one night on his way back home, where his mother spots him in her car and picks him up. When he sets out to discover his identity, he moves across the country without encountering significant obstacles and interacts with various people, although he is accompanied. While these journeys

are necessary as he wishes to discover his roots, the film may raise questions around the normalization of disability by downplaying the challenges that a visually impaired person can face, especially in the absence of adequate infrastructure. Nothing is mentioned, not even subtly, about the environmental or organizational challenges related to disability. Karin Ljuslinder (2014) noted about the film *Ego* (2013) that "the blind person may be dismissed and treated as non-able, helpless and dependent when another alternative would be to examine society's poorly developed infrastructure of support for the visually impaired" (273). In the case of *Rabih* or *Tramontane*, Rabih breaks these two patterns, he is not presented as non-able and dependent, but there is also no discussion on the lack of support infrastructure.

b) Breaking with Classical Stereotypes

The portrayal of Rabih thus differs from classical "stereotypes and inaccuracies and other recurring myths of blindness," such as the so-called "sixth sense" or "second sight" (Safran 474), ideas which are deeply rooted in cinema. This myth is debunked by Rabih himself when a religious figure from a locality asks him if he has a possible connection to the region:

"Let me ask you a question: it is said that the blind *see* seven times more than a sighted person, do you feel like you know this land? Do you feel like you belong here?

I neither *see* nor feel more or less than anyone else. All I want is a clue about past events." (38:25)

The film does not promote pity through its portrayal of Rabih. A few lines from third-party characters unfamiliar with the character are worth considering: "...So you are an orphan? -Yes. -Orphan and blind? -It is true. -May God have mercy on you, my son" (36:28). The director Vatche Boulgourjian deliberately aimed to distance himself from stereotypes and preconceptions about the concept of blindness "… where the protagonist either gropes his way forward or uses a cane, and often wears sunglasses" and where he is "either a victim or a sage"[4] (as cited in Korkmaz 144). His representation of Rabih, in which he strived for authenticity, creates, in his words, a sense of discomfort for some viewers when they "see a blind person act" (145). However, this effort to move away from stereotypes resulted in excessive normalization, as mentioned above.

Finally, the movie's full title contains two prominent names: *Rabih* (which means "spring" in Arabic), the first name of the film's main character, and *Tramontane*, which refers to a north-westerly wind. This dual nomenclature holds significant meaning as it evokes a personal dimension, narrating Rabih's individual journey as a visually impaired person in search of his true identity, while seamlessly intertwining it with a broader perspective—the collective blindness of Lebanon, a country that experienced a brutal civil war from 1975 to 1990 (noting that Rabih was born in 1988). Rabih's blindness serves as a metaphor for the country's blindness regarding its identity, a common approach highlighted by D. Mitchell and Sh. Snyder in literary discourse, where "disability pervades literary narrative [...] as an opportunistic metaphorical device", serving in some cases "as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse" (47). Despite this interpretation, in which disability is indeed metaphorical, this particular representation of the disabled person avoids falling into stereotypes or devaluation.

Autism Spectrum Disorder in By Chance or Bel Sodfé

When a hooded man steals her handbag, Richard Aouad chases him and ends up in the middle of a shantytown. He decides to stay in the apartment where he believes his thief has taken refuge in order to unmask him. There, he discovers an underprivileged world and, over time, develops a love for Farah, a woman who lives there with her daughter and her sister Faten (who turns out to be the thief). Taghreed is Farah's neighbour; she has autism spectrum disorder and lives with her grandfather who, often assisted by the neighbours, is her caretaker. We see her accompanying Farah to the laundry where Farah works during the day, at the movie theatre with Adnan, a young neighbour, playing with Farah's daughter, and more. Out of love for Farah and the neighbourhood, Richard enrols Taghreed in a specialized centre and decides to organize, at his own expense, the wedding of her grandfather and his neighbour in Cyprus, and most of the neighbourhood attends. He indirectly saves their lives since their building collapses in their absence. The film thus contrasts the realities of people from a poor, disadvantaged neighbourhood, with those of someone with a luxurious lifestyle.

a) The Disabled Figure as a Narrative Device

Taghreed is a supporting character in the film. She serves as a figure who interacts with the main, able-bodied character, without the film deeply exploring her experience as someone with autism. She often appears in the presence of able-bodied individuals, who discuss other topics, while her story is that of a woman who receives empathy from her loved ones, experiences harassment from others (mainly men), and struggles with her poverty in an environment that does not pay much attention to people with disabilities.

The character is portrayed in a manner that clearly seeks to elicit pity and charity, with scenes almost invariably centred around her symptoms. Her vulnerability is emphasized throughout the film. Taghreed is always depicted as passive and withdrawn, incapable of tending to her own needs or communicating verbally, showing a persistent lack of eye contact. She utters only three or four words (with difficulty) during her 14 minutes of screen time. When questioned by the gendarmes, Farah is adamant: "You cannot take her statement; you won't understand anything, and she won't understand you" (54:03). Her movements are unusual; she doesn't walk normally but rather jerks, constantly grimaces, and gestures with her hands. Some shots show here acting unconventionally in outdoor spaces, making awkward gestures and clearly standing out from the crowd. In the presence of strangers, she is often irritable, she cries, makes loud noises, and has fits that leave her on the ground. Her caregivers frequently intervene to calm her down, and she is shown to be dependent on them, often sleeping on her grandfather's or Farah's lap.

However, Taghreed has a rare talent; she can determine what day of the week any given date falls on. Strangely, the plot chooses to always have these dates fall on a Thursday. Her memory makes her an object of curiosity for Farah's colleague: "I talked about you to my aunt, and she didn't believe me. I'm going to call her to come and see with her own eyes" (22:42). To which Farah responds, "How many times have I told you that Taghreed is not here for a spectacle!" (22:49) In addition to being an object of attraction, Taghreed is also objectified by the male gaze: she experiences an attempted sexual assault by a neighbour in one scene, she is the target of a potential assault in the street in a second scene, and in a third scene, her grandfather speaks to Adnan, who was going to accompany Taghreed to the cinema, and issues an implicit warning: "-Adnan…", "-Don't tell me, Grandpa, Taghreed is like my sister" (35:17).

b) The Spectrum at its Extreme

Laura Carpenter organizes the symptoms of autism into three categories: 1) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction; 2) Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities; 3) Symptoms that, when combined, limit and impair everyday functioning. She classifies them into three levels based on their severity (Carpenter 6). We observe that Taghreed is presented as stereotypically autistic, displaying all of the described symptoms with maximum severity. While Alexandria Prochnow noted that "it would be impossible to perfectly depict each aspect of autism through television and film characters" (133) due to the spectrum's numerous characteristics and traits, Taghreed's character is pushed to the extreme. Prochnow also emphasized that "media tends to consolidate autistic characters into just four specific and mostly unrealistic categories […], magical/savant, 'different'/quirky, undiagnosed/unlabeled, and realistic portrayals" (136). Taghreed's representation falls into the second category, despite the film making an effort to show the real, lived experience of autistic individuals; Pamela El Kik, who portrays Taghreed, stated in interviews that she spent time at an autism support centre to immerse herself in her role as an autistic person.

As Rory Conn and Dinesh Bhugra observed while analysing 23 American movies with regard to their portrayal of autism, "the rocking, hand-flapping, headbanging behaviour of some autistic individuals provides a mesmerizing visual spectacle" (57). They conclude that the portrayal of autism in Hollywood films "is primarily dramatic and rarely realistic" (61). Similarly, Andrea Garner, Sandra Jones, and Valerie Harwood demonstrated in their 2015 study that "filmic portrayals of autism spectrum conditions are not normative relative to the autistic community" (423). The severity of symptoms is consistently much more exaggerated in the 15 films they studied than in the lives of autistic individuals. Alana Goldstein and Theodoto W. Ressa conducted a thematic analysis of three TV shows, identifying four major categories of autistic characters: the autistic savant with a photographic memory, autistic dependent and burdensome, autistic emotionally detached and socially deficient, and autistic innocent and childlike (4). Taghreed's character appears to encompass the last three traits.

Finally, *By Chance* is the only one of the four films that directly criticises public institutions and policies. To the representative of law enforcement, Farah says: "Taghreed needs to go to a school tailored to people like her. She lives in constant danger among monsters called humans. [...] When will you take care of people like her, sir?" (54:52). This idea is raised in other contexts, where the protagonists emphasize that Taghreed's place is in a specialized institution that is not available to everyone.

Conclusion

Disability and the lives of those with disabilities are not recurring subjects in contemporary Lebanese cinema, reflecting a low level of engagement with the topic, despite a few social and institutional initiatives taking place in the past decade. The four films featuring disabled individuals exhibit both similarities and differences in how they portray disabled individuals. Several variables come into play, including the film's genre, the storyline, and the nature of the disability, among others. These films oscillate between critiquing societal norms and state policies, adhering to a medical model when considering disabilities, and normalizing disability.

In *Ghadi*, *Bébé*, and *By Chance*, there is criticism of an inhospitable environment that makes individuals "doubly disabled" (Blanc 51). All four films emphasize, to varying degrees, the role of the family in caring for disabled individuals, where disability, as noted by S. P. Hill in the context of Italian cinema, is portrayed "largely as an individual or family affair rather than a societal or political issue" (169). Furthermore, the general dependency that the four disabled individuals have on their caregivers is the most prominent value highlighted. A paternalistic protectiveness characterizes all four disabled characters, to varying degrees. This protection aims to shield them from the outside world, from able-bodied individuals: In Ghadi's case, it's the irritated neighbours, in Bébé's case it's her greedy brother and the traps he sets, in Taghreed's situation, it's the men who view her as a sexual target, and in Rabih's case, it's a dark past that he seeks to understand.
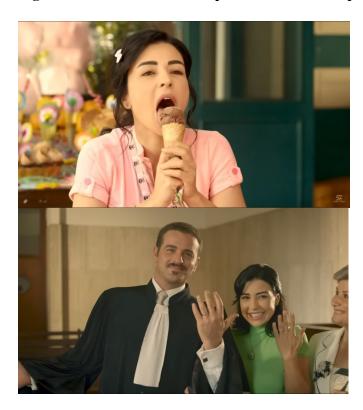
Furthermore, we uncovered a tendency to exaggerate representations of a disability when the roles were played by able-bodied actresses, presumably to highlight the actor's performance (as seen in the cases of Bébé and Taghreed). In contrast, in the two films where the actors had real-life disabilities, the portrayal was more subdued (in the case of Ghadi) and sometimes

excessively normalized (as in Rabih's case). The latter, in any case, deviates from the historical binary representations of individuals with disabilities.

Ghadi and *By Chance* demonstrate how cinema can reinforce the notion of normalcy by adopting and incorporating characters with disabilities (Ghadi and Taghreed) as "narrative prostheses" to advance the stories of able-bodied individuals. However, we have observed that disability is overcome in all four films, culminating in a happy ending that would comfort the average viewer: Taghreed enrols in a specialized school, Bébé fully integrates into the "able-bodied" society as the spouse of a well-placed man, Ghadi becomes entirely integrated (and even adored) in his neighbourhood, while Rabih, despite being unable to discover the truth about his identity, eventually obtains a valid passport (and identity).
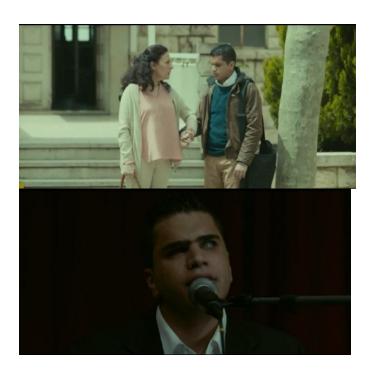
Finally, the analysis of representations of disabilities appears to yield more meaningful insights when taking into account the intersectional identity of the disabled figure and their layers of identity (such as gender, social class, age, religious affiliation, place of residence, legal status). These factors, which we have attempted to incorporate into our analysis, can help enhance the development of nuanced means by which to represent disabled individuals in media. They will allow future researchers, given a more comprehensive analysis of other types of media productions, to more toward more subtle and varied conclusions.

Figures 1 & 2: Few scenes depict Ghadi in his experience in *Ghadi* (2013)

Figures 3 & 4: The male gaze and the disabled in *Bébé* (2013)

Figures 5 & 6: Rabih's disability normalized in *Rabih* or *Tramontane* (2016)

Figures 7 & 8: Autism spectrum disorder in the extreme in *By Chance* or *Bel Sodfé* (2019)

Notes

1. Our translation.
2. Cinema emerged in Lebanon as early as the 1920s. Faced with competition from American and Egyptian cinema, it truly flourished in the 1960s, especially following the nationalization of cinema in Egypt under Gamal Abdel-Nasser. During the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the local film industry was devastated, with the infrastructure destroyed and many artists going into exile. However, this period became a breeding ground for a cinematic renewal. This renewal largely emerged in the latter half of the 2000s when several works and numerous filmmakers achieved international success, despite the fact that Lebanese cinema "has no production infrastructure to speak of, being almost completely reliant on foreign funding" (Khatib 186). These films spanned a range of genres, from art-house films (such as *Rabih*) to cult classics or technically advanced films accessible to a broader audience (like *Ghadi*), and commercially popular films typically aimed at television movie audiences (*Bébé* and *By Chance*).
3. Note that two of the four films deal with stuttering, which is considered a communication disorder rather than a disability.
4. Our translation.

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Bionotes

Roy Jreijiry, Ph.D., is a researcher and Professor of Information and Communication Sciences at the Lebanese University (Beirut). His research interests centre around political communication, media discourse, and gender studies. He can be reached at jreijiry_roy@hotmail.com

ORCID Id: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4872-8773

Carla Dreij is a Ph.D. student in a joint doctoral program in media and gender studies between the University of Côte d'Azur (Nice), affiliated with the LIRCES laboratory, and the Lebanese University. Her thesis revolves around the intricate dynamics of femininities and masculinities within contemporary Lebanese cinema (2005–2019), employing a contextualized approach to intersectionality. Her research aims for a better understanding of the gender power dynamics that structure the symbolic space of the film within diverse social contexts, navigating the shifting tensions between (re)patriarchalization and depatriarchalization logics. She can be reached at carladreij@hotmail.com

ORCID Id: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3110-6811

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